

It's Never Tech Late to Learn: Promoting Digital Literacy and Social Connection Among Older Adults

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Abstract: Social isolation and loneliness are important issues for older adults. This paper discusses a program called NeverTechLate (NTL) that was created to combat these issues by providing digital literacy education and by promoting the use of tablets and video conferencing technology to empower older adults. This program involved using the feedback from a focus group to develop a pilot project of eight 1-hour lessons which were delivered to residents of an independent living facility. The results of focus groups after the pilot project concluded provided insight into future directions for the curriculum and training.

Keywords: older adults, digital literacy, curriculum, training development, technology

Social isolation and loneliness have been issues facing older adults even before the tumultuous days of the COVID-19 pandemic. According to Cacioppo and Cacioppo (2018), “loneliness is a unique condition in which an individual perceives himself or herself to be socially isolated even when among other people.” Rubin (2017) also notes that loneliness is linked to troubling health concerns such as cardiovascular disease, Alzheimer’s disease, and stroke. Vaportis et al. (2017) conducted focus groups with older adults whose results suggested that while they were apprehensive about a perceived lack of clear instructions and support, most participants were excited to learn new technology and were willing to learn to use a tablet. NTL, a program founded in 2019, seeks to empower older adults by providing digital literacy education and by promoting social connections through use of tablets and video conferencing technology. The purpose of this paper is to discuss the background of NTL, the approach to the curriculum design and pilot project, and discuss the results of the follow-up focus groups.

Background

NTL was founded by Florence Mauchant based on several observations of older adults and society but was truly inspired by her mother. Her mother left school at age 14 and was never able to catch up with education, let alone with technology. Mauchant wanted to give the growing population of older adults a chance to learn about technology and how it can be used to fight loneliness and social isolation.

The NTL program was developed in consultation with Dr. Jacqueline McGinty, Assistant Professor in the Department of Professional Studies in Education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. A research study was conducted to design a digital literacy curriculum and training program (McGinty, 2020).

Approach

The development of a curriculum to teach older adults about digital literacy and encourage connecting with friends and family through the use of video conferencing began by conducting a needs assessment at an independent living facility in Pennsylvania (McGinty, 2020). Feedback on experiences, interests, and concerns about using technology was collected from a focus group of ten residents from this facility, and this was used to create the pilot project curriculum (McGinty, 2020). The curriculum consisted of 8 1-hour lessons, delivered weekly, and each lesson included technology information, games, vocabulary, homework assignments, and time for student questions (McGinty, 2020).

Graduate student volunteer “coaches” were recruited from an instructional design program at Indiana University of Pennsylvania to deliver the instruction. These coaches were provided lesson materials and trained to deliver the lessons while being mindful of delivery speed, volume, and concept repetition (McGinty, 2020).

The pilot project consisted of two groups made up of eight students each. The lessons covered topics such as technology vocabulary terms, exploring the tablet features, connecting to others, and internet safety. Each student was provided with a Lenovo tablet computer in lesson 4 to use for the duration of the pilot project. They were taught to use this tablet and how to connect with others using the Zoom Video Communications app. The students were able to keep the tablets for as long as they live at the independent living facility. As of November 2020, all 16 of the students continue to use the NTL tablets, 10 months after pilot project completion (McGinty, 2020).

Discussion

After the pilot project concluded, a focus group was conducted with the students. They indicated that they had positive experiences with the NTL lessons (McGinty, 2020). They emphasized the community-building aspects of the experience and that they enjoyed working together to meet their goals (McGinty, 2020). One student noted that he was able to use the skills he learned to organize a surprise video conference birthday party for his wife. He was able to connect more than a dozen family members in six states to sing “Happy Birthday” and celebrate the day in a way that would not have been possible before his NTL experience.

An additional focus group was conducted with the coaches to collect feedback on the curriculum. The coaches noted that the students’ experiences and comfort with technology at the beginning of the pilot project varied (McGinty, 2020). This led to some students needing more one-on-one instruction, particularly during more technical lessons. Coaches also noted that their training would have been improved by more extensive tablet practice and additional video conference training (McGinty, 2020). Overall, the coaches had positive experiences participating in the NTL pilot project.

The results of these focus groups were used to create an updated version of the curriculum. In future iterations of this project, students will be given the tablets earlier in the course so that they

have more time to practice using the tablets with the coaches. More step-by-step instruction combined with this time for practice will help the students become familiar with the technology.

Thanks to the COVID-19 pandemic, future iterations of this project will have the unique complication of needing to be delivered remotely to students. Currently, NTL is developing a remote Train-the-Trainer (TT) program to educate future coaches about topics including the history of NTL, the curriculum, the role of the trainer, technology and the older adult, training and the older adult, the Zoom Video Communications app, the Lenovo tablet, and, importantly, delivering instruction remotely to older adults. This TT program will involve a *master class* to cover this material as well as *shorter meetings*, prior to each of the eight lessons, during which coaches will review the lesson material in detail.

Future research will involve focus groups and feedback to make necessary adjustments to the course curriculum. This research and subsequent adjustments will benefit not only the residents of one independent living facility but hopefully allow for program growth and expansion to improve the lives of older adults throughout the United States.

References

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